

MATCHES AND LIGHTERS

Fires, burns and property damage associated with children playing with matches are common events in the United States and a number of programs and procedures have been developed to try to control this problem. In the past few years, a new source of ignition has become very common - the cigarette lighter.

With the increase in the use of lighters rather than matches, there follows an increase in lighter-related fires and burns associated with misuse by children. There also seems to be an alteration in the age distribution. Lighters are easier to ignite than matches, in many cases, so younger children more frequently are involved in lighter-associated fires/burns. Several reports now have implicated children as young as 18-20 months old.

Children have a natural curiosity about fire. It has appeal, which captures their attention. They see adults start the barbecue or light a cigarette. Since they mimic adults in many ways, they want to mimic fire-starting behavior as well. Children's curiosity about fire should not be discouraged, but channeled into appropriate behavior.

Children are at high risk for burn injuries largely due to their own experimentation with matches and fire. Since children have difficulty appreciating the use of matches as a tool, they most often will misuse them. Children need to understand that big fires start small. They need to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate use of matches and lighters. They also need to understand the risks and dangers associated with their use.

Young children should not handle matches and lighters and they should be taught that they should "tell an adult" when they find matches or lighters in their environment. They should be taught to "leave matches and lighters where they find them" and "get an adult to come back and pick them up." This avoids the problem of a child handling matches or a lighter and possibly attempting to ignite either.

Children can easily identify tools in the home or workplace. They understand that a tool can be used a right way and a wrong way. A hammer is used to drive nails into wood, and a saw is used to cut lumber.

A match is also a tool. It can be used the right way, or a wrong way. Using a match to light a barbecue, start a fire in the fireplace, or ignite the pilot light on the water heater, are proper ways to use a match.

Be sure the child knows that matches and lighters are tools, not toys. There are toys that look like lighters. These toys should not be given to children. Adults have been known to give a lighter that no longer works to children to play with. This should not happen since the child doesn't know the difference between a lighter that does work and one that doesn't.

Many fires have been caused by children playing with matches or lighters due to curiosity, carelessness or anger. Telling a child "Don't play with matches" may not have the desired effect, and, in fact may encourage the opposite. In some cases, children may exhibit more than just a simple interest in fire and may frequently discuss or experiment with it. Sometimes when a child has a problem with starting fires or playing with fire, the child is responding to problems in the home, at school or with peers. Fire setting problems can be prevented if identified early and the child is provided with professional counseling. If you discover burnt matches or paper, or believe a child has been playing with lighters or setting fires, call the Department of Public Health or the Guam Fire Department.

Here are safety rules that adults should be aware of concerning matches and lighters.

- Buy matchbooks that have a striking surface on the back cover.
- Close the cover of the matchbook or box before striking the match.
- Strike a match away from the direction of the body.
- When striking a match, hold it an arm's length away.
- Only use matches or lighters when nothing else is distracting you.
- Matches or lighters are very dangerous around flammable liquids such as gasoline.
- A wastebasket is not an ashtray.
- Throw a match away only after the flame is extinguished and cool to the touch.
- Check your lighter regularly for cracks, leaks and other defects.

- If lighter fluid is spilled on or near the lighter, it should be cleaned off completely before lighting the flame.
- Persons with restricted mobility or reflexes and elderly persons must use extra caution with lighters and matches